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MOODY'S *THE FIRE BRINGER* FOR TO-DAY

In the midst of the catastrophe of the war we look to our poets for help in interpreting the mystery of human experience. We seek the guidance of their ideals, the inspiration to be won from the vision of those who see a meaning beyond the chaos and suffering and brutality of the present. But when we look about for an American poet able to divine our special needs we look almost in vain. Few of our poets have the power to sting us into thought and to lead our thoughts into regions where we shall be purified and enlightened in spirit to such a degree that we shall find courage and a well-justified hope. In the work of William Vaughn Moody there is just that challenge which we need so bitterly, and his drama *The Fire Bringer* is a most potent voice calling to us in tones that suit this very hour.

Moody's poetry, created and dominated by a personal passion for spiritual understanding, is wrought out with a beauty of form and a vigor of imagination which have not been surpassed in America. American most distinctively, despite strains of German, French, and Spanish blood, and despite his cosmopolitan education, Moody is the child of the Puritans. He inherited that grim, aspiring, relentless mood which would not be thwarted in its zeal for holiness. He had scant interest in local, temporal aspects of American life; he was concerned with America's soul, and he is the guide, the interpreter of our ideals, the prophet of the destiny towards which we stumble. Nothing but a profound tradition of religious passion could have produced his intense preoccupation with spiritual issues and his fierce rebellion against conventional faith. Possessing the energy which hews and builds, which endures all hardships for the sake of spiritual freedom, he is the pioneer who forces his way into the wilderness of truth, facing unknown dangers in his ceaseless search for knowledge of God. Pilgrim and martyr speak in this:—

“Truth is not soon made plain, nor in a breath
Fluently solved while the chance listener waits,
Nor by the elemental wrestling mind
Wrung from the rock with sobs. Myself have held,
Where in the sun's core light and thought are one,
Æons of questions, and am darkling still.”

207 One truth which Puritanism had not learned was clear to
221 Moody,—the essential unity of body and spirit. It is the fusion,
the reconciliation of these two aspects of life which gives his
poetry so vital a significance. Most of us have failed to interpret
life as a unit; we shift and evade in our effort to live, without
meeting squarely the fundamental question of the duties of
the body in servitude to the spirit. We divide existence into
Sundays and weekdays. Moody knew no such distinctions; his
whole purpose was to avoid a dualism of allegiance. Life must
be a whole, not two parts:—

“How long, old builder Time, wilt bide
Till at thy thrilling word
Life's crimson pride shall have to bride
The spirit's white accord,
Within that gate of good estate
Which thou must build us soon or late,
Hoar workman of the Lord?”

The faithful survivor of one religious movement, he is the foreteller of another, for he voices the potent, inspiring truths to be won from the doctrine of evolution. No other idea in the nineteenth century so quickened idealism, aroused and directed high aspiration as did this doctrine interpreted by poets such as Browning and George Meredith. Moody, trained in these conceptions, accepted evolution with profound conviction, and saw all life illuminated by the faith that through ardent, unremitting struggle the individual can slowly progress toward spiritual perfection. There are still many persons to-day who repudiate with horror the doctrine of evolution, who still fail to perceive the transcendent beauty of the idea that man's will is superior to circumstance and can shape and form the plastic thing called self; that man may look forward with hope to a future whose perfection he must help create by his active aspiration, by his positive determination. There is scarcely a poem of Moody's which does not touch some aspect of evolution.

The ability to think profoundly and yet to express his thoughts in vivid concreteness of poetic image, distinguishes Moody from the mere versifier who turns out ethical and æsthetic common-places. Moody never succumbed to the desire to please the

Musa Meretrix, and his greatness as a poet is due to his dogged tenacity and persistence in attempting to express a coherent, centred interpretation of man's spiritual destiny in a world of glowing beauty and appeal. His singleness of aim, his steadily increasing insight, his fastidious self-criticism kept him from rapid and vapid composition. Consequently we have not a large body of poetry from his pen, but what we do possess is most carefully wrought.

The note of studiousness and, too, of learning condemns him in the eyes of those who believe the poet must be a glorious, unattached apparition like a comet, but the very fact that he is profoundly familiar with the Bible, the Greek dramatists, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Browning, and Meredith, gives his work a value which is incontestable. He has the superior advantage of having assimilated their ideals and of being able to carry on the development of these ideals through his distinctly personal interpretation. Our faith in a poet's mission is greatly strengthened if we know that he is no mere attenuated voice of the moment, but is, rather, the associate of older truths, of inherited ideas which he has pondered with all of a poet's kindling passion, and which he, in his era, seeks to understand and to transcend in a fuller, richer meaning, if possible; that intimate relationship to the slowly evolved continuity of human thought and feeling is essential for any poetic understanding of loyalty, constancy, or permanency and for any vision of the future. Fundamentally, Moody is original both in idea and in artistic method; his accents reveal individual potency of life and have a challenging sharpness of personality. The dominant traits of his poetry are uniquely, characteristically, Moody's own.

In the dramas, *The Fire Bringer* and *The Masque of Judgment*, he strove to express his essential conceptions of spiritual truth. His philosophy was by no means completely formulated, but was slowly being evolved as life and thought guided him to deeper insight. These dramas are the closely pondered utterances of a powerful human personality seeking to interpret man's relation to God, and to do this in the light of past theology and older literature as well as in the light of the present day. The casual reader may perceive chiefly the highly

picturesque and mythological elements in the work, but closer study will reveal the fact that these poems represent an almost tragic struggle on the part of one devout by nature, skeptical through education and observation,—one who in an awful loneliness of mind endeavored to rend the veil from those mysteries which the spiritual man must know. By no means unquestionable masterpieces, with flaws in expression,—stiffness and frequent heaviness,—these dramas are nevertheless great poetic creations. The blank verse is often of an extraordinarily high order, as will be seen in the lines quoted. The choric odes, like the odes already mentioned, are skilfully adapted to give lyric relief to the drama.

Moody's theme was the immutable, eternal unity of God and man. Seeking to express this in poetic, concrete imagery, interpreting his spiritual conviction in terms comprehensible to all readers, he turned to the two chief religious traditions of the western world,—the pagan and the Christian. Although he availed himself of these associations he interpreted them with the greatest freedom, for he seemed to feel no need of complete verisimilitude. In pagan as well as in Christian setting he used freely whatever he chose of the essential teaching of evolution, of the developing philosophy of idealism, and the doctrines of complete freedom of the will, the individual's power of choice.

Although it was written later than *The Masque of Judgment*, Moody placed *The Fire Bringer* first in the trilogy which was to be completed by *The Death of Eve*. There is no inter-relationship in these works, except the reiteration of the essential theme, the inviolable unity of God and man. *The Fire Bringer* is Hellenic in background and in central imagery, but fused with traditions from the Greek are recollections of *Paradise Lost*, *Prometheus Unbound*, *Hyperion*, and also hints of Browning's influence. The drama is unquestionably the greatest of Moody's achievements, and reveals most completely the deep beauty and power of the poet's endowment. Here, in a myth of old Greece, is wonderful dramatic revelation of the meaning of evolution, the supremacy of spiritual over material forces. The story of Prometheus and his theft of fire from the gods is the dramatic medium by which Moody draws a realistic picture to embody

his doctrine. The scene opens just after the flood has subsided, and Deucalion and Pyrrha, with a few other survivors, are revealed in the half-light, together with the men and women created, as in legend, from the stones which Deucalion and Pyrrha have thrown behind them. In a world dank, cold, desolate, crouch all these beings, fearful of what the gods may ordain next. Prometheus, failing in his first effort to gain the sacred fire, has come to add his dejection to the horror of those left—

"To rot and crumble with the crumbling world."

It is then that the most important figure in the drama appears,—Pandora, the mysterious being who represents, partly, woman, but still more the quality of spiritual energy, of aspiring vitality of will. Pandora, beloved of Prometheus, is the force that awakens him from his lethargy, and, giving him the stalk of fennel, inspires him to new vigor, so that he returns victorious, bringing back to listless humanity the fire, symbolic of material progress and of spiritual light and power. The scene of Prometheus' return shows Moody's remarkable skill in description of nature. The slow coming of dawn, as in *Prometheus Unbound* and in *Hyperion*, is eloquently pictured, but Moody is here no imitator. This is a Greek sunrise, such as he had often seen flood the Greek mountains.—

"Paler grow

The gulfs of shadowy air that brim the vales,
As ocean bateth in her thousand firths,
The grey and silver air draws down the land.
The little trees that climb among the rocks
As high as they can live, pierce with their spires
The shoaling mist, swim softly into light,
And stand apparent, shapely, every one
A dream of divine life, a miracle."

As the glorious day brings them light and hope, the weak mortals quicken to new existence; joy, exaltation, love are wakened in the hearts of young and old, and a new era is begun.

The meaning of the drama may be interpreted without much involved symbolism. Man is dejected, sorrowful, inert, always looking backward toward a remembered or a fancied period of happiness. Lax, without purpose, without initiative, he is stirred to vigor of life by some force outside himself, by some mind

keener, stronger, more daring than his own. Under the impetus of hope, brought by the gift of fire, even the clods are awakened and slowly—

“The unwrought shapes, the unmoulded attitudes,
The tongues of earth, the stony craving eyes”

begin to show marvelous signs of progress as the truth of the domination of mind over flesh is revealed to them. The scenes where the stone men and women are endowed with the gift of inner life, of self-direction, are impressively vivid. The reader is in the presence of primitive creation, watching mortality struggle away from shapelessness, sloth, dullness, into an ever-increasing power of controlled, significant life. All the persons in the drama reveal in some way the eternal awakening to higher, finer impulses. Not only in casting off physical torpor, but in ridding themselves of fear, superstition, and cruelty, the earth-dwellers reveal the far-reaching effects of spiritual illumination. Man's sharp dread of human experience is brought out in the realistic protest made against this unfolding of keener life. Humanity shrinks back, daunted, uneasy, loving the familiar, afraid of the mysteries to be revealed by existence. Even in the midst of spiritual revelation we cling to earth, hesitating, fearful of strange truths:—

“God, my God,
Thou see'st my quivering spirit what it is!
O lay not life upon it. We know not
The thing we asked for. We had all forgot
How cruel was thy splendor in the house
Of sense, how awful in the house of thought,
How far unbearable in the wild house
That thou hast cast and builded for the heart.”

This is life for humanity, this mingled doubt, wonder, and splendor. And the leaders themselves, the spirits finer, more daring than the average have their sufferings also. The moments of exultation are swiftly passing; at his highest, man is subject to powers unknown; his visions and aspirations fluctuate and die away after a failure. The power of practical execution of an ideal seems hopelessly lost. It is then that a greater power comes to his aid, to spur him on. Invisible forces of spirit are the real source of fine action and achievement. Pandora is the

symbol of quivering, ideal perception and an aspiration never quiescent, but always in motion, always seeking, finding truth. She is the soul of man, the tenacious faith, the boundless hope, and the love which is absence of the body in the presence of the spirit. Love quickens Prometheus, but not a selfish love; it is the revelation wrought by love that inspires him to victory. The song sung by Pandora as she gives him the fennel stalk is the consummate expression of human courage and hope. It is unquestionably the most perfect lyric ever written by Moody. The vividly imaginative use of figure, the yearning note of spiritual aspiration, give the poem ideal lyric beauty.—

"Of wounds and sore defeat
I made my battle stay;
Wingèd sandals for my feet
I wove of my delay;
Of weariness and fear,
I made my shouting spear;
Of loss, and doubt, and dread,
And swift oncoming doom
I made a helmet for my head,
And a floating plume.
From the shutting mist of death,
From the failure of the breath,
I made a battle-horn to blow
Across the vales of overthrow.
O hearken, love, the battle-horn!
The triumph clear, the silver scorn!
O hearken where the echoes bring,
Down the grey disastrous morn,
Laughter and rallying."

Even though the achievement of Prometheus brings hope and vigor to all, though latent power is released, he suffers for his magnanimity. Valor, virtue, generous action, are always achieved at great cost to the hero himself. Prometheus, actuated by the most noble motives, is, at the end, punished, made to atone for his audacity. And here is the crux of the human problem. Why is virtue so seldom rewarded? Why does the unselfish man suffer? Why is an heroic act so often a martyrdom? It is the spectacle of this which seems so fundamentally unjust that has darkened the faith of men, and has made life seem futile. But, as Moody would say, this verdict of ours is one more sign of our

failure to have large conceptions. We judge meanly spiritual life and the opportunity for expression of high endeavor and aspiration. We flee from the truth that the fundamental law of the inner life is struggle. Virtue easily gained is valueless. Heroism amply rewarded is not heroism. The test of idealism, not Shelleyan vagueness but efficient idealism, is the courage to face the suffering that is the beneficent law of the universe. It is not passive reception of benefits that makes existence noble. God never intended man to sit in idle comfort, blandly receiving divine charity. It is a world of continued, desperate endeavor, of daring, of energy, of taking chances. It is the uncertainty, the knowledge that some price must be paid, the premonition of sacrifice that gives mankind spiritual strength and nobility. Insight, strength, idealism, are gained by effort, by perpetual striving.

What sort of God has, then, ordained a world of pain and struggle when he might so easily have created a world of pleasure? The definition of God is a most significant part of the drama, and we see God from various dramatic points of view as the characters of the drama discern him. To the lesser beings, there is a hierarchy of gods who must be propitiated, pleased, by bloody sacrifice; their conception of Deity is a conception of strength and cruelty. Deucalion and Pyrrha are wiser, but they, too, cower in dread of gods revengeful, indifferent, or teasing. Alert, on the defensive always, conscious of antagonism to the divine, Prometheus emphasizes man's power of achievement, and insists that it is illimitable, identical with the divine, although the conditions of life make it essential for man to take the initiative and wrest from the gods that which he would possess:—

“For these, if you would keep them, you must strive
Morning and night against the jealous gods,
With anger, and with laughter, and with love ;
But no man hath them till he brings them down
With love, and rage, and laughter from the heavens,—
Himself the heavens, himself the scornful gods,
The sun, the sun-thief, and the flaming reed
That kindles new the beauty of the world.”

It is through the words of Pandora that we become aware of the true personality of the Ruler of the universe:—

"I stood within the heart of God ;
It seemed a place that I had known ;
(I was blood-sister to the clod,
Blood-brother to the stone.)

"I found my love and labor there,
My house, my raiment, meat and wine,
My ancient rage, my old despair,—
Yea, all things that were mine."

In these lines is the key to Moody's faith. The Divine Spirit is within us as well as without. He suffers with Prometheus. He is understanding, aspiration, and an eternal sympathizer in the life which He has created. Never more can the conception of a God of wrath and cruel vindictiveness be admitted by the minds of men. Most significantly, Moody makes the earthmen and women change their conception of God as they slowly develop higher ideas of life. Singing the might of Eros and of Iacchus, they gradually abandon their earthly ideas of the divine, and as their fleshly moods are refined away, as the splendor of existence is made clearer to them, they, through the mouths of the young men, acknowledge the supremacy of one God, a god of inner eternal light:—

"For thou alone, O thou alone art he
Who settest the prisoned spirit free,
And sometimes ledest the rapt soul on
Where never mortal thought has gone."

He has shown that true religion is an outgrowth of the old; that evolution is always economy, pruning away the weak and useless and creating the new by saving and shaping every vestige of significance in the old. The greatness of *The Fire Bringer* is due to the large conception of the unity of a world organically related in time and in space; a world where every part must constantly adapt, adjust, discipline itself to contribute to the perfection of the whole. In showing that God has thus made man the arbiter of his own destiny, has thrown upon man the burden of perceiving and of developing the divine within himself, Moody has proved himself a poet of profoundest insight.

There has been no other poet since Browning who expresses as does Moody the deep questioning and spiritual endeavor of

mankind. In a daring, unfettered effort to find truth, he was not afraid to follow where truth led, even into the utmost reaches of speculation. He did not avoid the logic of his thinking, nor bend his observations to prove his special theories. He had that impartial, intensely receptive attitude which animates the true student of things eternal. His cardinal belief, that man and God are inseparable, was to him a source of exhaustless hope, but he recognized the necessity laid upon man of constant, tireless, undaunted effort. Struggle is the law of life, and the persons who find life unendurable are the victims of their own negligence and inertia. The man who walks erect in the full light of his opportunities, gains a knowledge, an insight forever intensifying itself. Man, earth, God are copartners in the eternal advance of spirit, subduing, transcending matter. Man must be purified until he knows the living truth and has by active effort gained his spiritual integrity. It is a doctrine of scant pleasure to those who yearn for peace at any price. The quiescence of the spiritually weak is a badge of their bondage to the flesh. Beauty, order, progress, nobility, idealism are all gained by struggle :—

“Darkly, but oh, for good, for good,
The spirit infinite
Was throned upon the perishable blood.”

MARTHA HALE SHACKFORD.

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